

# An Interpretation of Plato's *Ion*

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In Xenophon's *Banquet* Antisthenes asks, "Do you know any tribe more stupid [or simple] than the rhapsodes?" This question, obviously rhetorical, leads the reader of the *Ion* to the further question, "Why in the world does Socrates choose to speak to a man like Ion, a typical member of the tribe of rhapsodes?" Even though Socrates claims that he investigates men with respect to their knowledge and ignorance, it is hard to see why he should think it important to test Ion. Moreover, their conversation is private, so that it cannot be Socrates' intention to show Ion off, or up, to others. Socrates in the dialogues exposes the important kinds of human souls and their characteristic errors. To make this particular discussion a worthwhile enterprise for him, the empty reciter of Homer's poems must represent something beyond himself.

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Socrates seems most anxious to have this conversation, since it is he who apparently stops Ion, who shows no particular interest in Socrates or desire to talk to him. Thus the first four exchanges occur entirely at Socrates' initiative, Ion responding in a way which would end the dialogue if Socrates did not return to the charge. Ion is a self-satisfied man who feels no need to render an account of himself or his activity; he knows who he is and what he does; and he knows both himself and his activity to be important. He is as far from the radical self-doubt of philosophy as a man can be. He is willing to talk about

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himself and accept praise; he has, however, little curiosity about others, for he does not sense a pressing need to learn from them. In order to engage Ion and induce him to reveal himself, Socrates must attract him and become respectable for him. Ion is vain, and he is first attracted by flattery and then captured when his self-esteem is threatened.

Socrates begins by expressing the greatest interest in Ion's achievements, making it clear that he is one of Ion's admirers. We learn from Socrates' first questions about Ion's recent doings that Ion is a man who travels from city to city and is admired in the cities he visits. He is not bound by the ordinary limits of citizenship: he is a cosmopolitan (or more properly a Hellenapolitan, for his universality will prove to be counterfeit, based on Greek convention rather than anything universally human). His rhapsody is his passport, and he finds proof for his worth in the prizes the peoples award him. He knows himself in relation to the unquestionable acclaim he evokes from others. Above all, Ion is needed to partake in the festivals dedicated to the gods whom all Greeks honor. He is a servitor of the Greeks, and his authority is somehow connected with the gods of the Greeks; this is the ground of his pious vanity.

530 Socrates, who apparently knows Ion's character, prevents him  
b-c from breaking off the conversation by praising him. Once Ion has taken Socrates' bait, he will soon be at his mercy—begging Socrates for a justification for his way of life. Socrates professes envy of the rhapsodes, and he goes on to specify what arouses that ugly but flattering passion in him. The rhapsodes are among the knowers; they possess an art—a skill or a kind of knowhow. That art is divided into two apparently unrelated parts of widely divergent dignity: its practitioners adorn their bodies so as to look most beautiful, and they occupy themselves with the thought of the good poets, especially the divine Homer, the teacher of the Greeks. Socrates has to explain what he means by the second part of the art, which is apparently not as clear as the first. To be a good rhapsode, one must understand what a given poet says, for the rhapsode is a spokesman or interpreter of the poet's thought to the listeners. Hence, the rhapsode must know what the poet means. Knowledge of what the poet thinks and fidelity in conveying his thought to an audience constitute the core of the rhapsode's art. He is an intermediary whose sole authority emanates from the poet.

530 Ion readily accepts this description of what he does, not consider-



c-d ing its broad implications. He has not reflected on art in general nor on the particular requirements of an art of Homeric thought. He does not see that the conversation has really moved from a discussion of himself and of rhapsody to a testing of the interpreters of Homer. Ion's adequacy as an interpreter is about to be put to the test, and thus the received interpretation of Homer, the interpretation by the most popular and typical of his interpreters, is to be called into question.

In response to Socrates' assertions about Ion's art, Ion avows that Socrates has hit the nail on the head and that it is precisely to understanding the thought of Homer that he devotes the greatest energy. He is delighted to participate in the prestige generally accorded to Homer, but he also covertly tries to strike out on his own; he puts the accent on his contribution to Homer, on what is his own rather than Homer's. His speech, not Homer's, is particularly beautiful; he has more fair thoughts about Homer than anyone. He is not simply Homer's faithful servant. Socrates recognizes that Ion would like to give a display of his talents; this is Ion's work, and he counts on charming his auditors, charming them in such a way that they ask no further questions. Ion insists that he is really worth hearing; he reminds us of the forgotten first part of the rhapsode's art: he has *adorned* Homer and for that he deserves to be adorned with a golden crown by the devotees of Homer. He uses Homer to his profit. Socrates, however, does not permit Ion's disloyalty to Homer; he has no interest in an Ion independent of Homer. The ever idle Socrates says he has no leisure to listen to the performance of Greece's greatest rhapsode; he wants the answer to only one question.

531a That question is as follows: is Ion clever only about Homer or about Hesiod and Archilochus too? This apparently naive query leads to the heart of the matter, for Socrates knows that Ion will respond that Homer is sufficient for him. And the fact that Ion has no curiosity about the teachings of the other poets is symptomatic of what he is—the most conventional agent of what is most conventional. It is a thing to be wondered at—though far from uncommon—that a man would be willing to live his life according to principles which are merely given to him, while he would not purchase so much as a cloak without investigating the alternatives. Socrates investigates such a man in this little conversation, one who accepts Homer's view of the gods, the heroes, and men without any need to see whether what the other poets say about these things is in any way useful. Even more, Ion is the one who transmits the Homeric view. In a word, he repre-



sents tradition. He accepts the orthodox view, and he teaches it. He does not seek reasons why this particular tradition should be accepted rather than any other. If there are a number of conflicting accounts of the world, men must make a choice between them. But Ion and his kind can give no reasons why their particular source should be preferred. They can merely assert the superiority of their text. In this respect, Homer's book resembles the Bible. It has adherents who rely on it utterly but who can provide no argument in its favor when confronted with other books. And if the book cannot be defended, neither can the way of life grounded in it. Ion relies on Homer, which would be sufficient if he had no competitors. But there are always other poets in addition to the official ones. The Greeks learn the poems of Hesiod and Archilochus as well as those of Homer, and any man who questions must wonder which of them he should follow, for his happiness depends on the right answer. For Ion, Homer is sufficient, but for the sole reason that it is for reciting Homer's poetry that golden crowns are awarded.

531 Socrates presses the question about Ion's competence with the  
a-b other poets in a comprehensive fashion; he does not leave it at Ion's insistence that the rhapsode need know only Homer. Where Homer and Hesiod say the same thing, Ion must be an equally competent exegete of both. So Ion turns out to be an expert on a part of Hesiod as well as on the whole of Homer. Now they must test Ion's expertise on the remainder—the part of Hesiod which is not the same as Homer. It is not so easy to determine this part as the other, and a new step must be introduced into the argument. Socrates begins to forge the link between what Homer and Hesiod say differently by pointing to a subject matter about which they both speak: divining. Now, divining plays a great role in the *Ion*, but here it is brought in innocuously as an example of a common theme of the poets. When the poets say the same thing, the poets' words are enough; when they say different things, one must turn away from the words to the things the words are about. Both Hesiod and Homer mention divining, and their words about it take on meaning from the object to which these words relate. And it is the diviner who can comment on what both Hesiod and Homer say about divining, not because he is a student of the words of Hesiod and Homer, but because he knows divining.

Knowers draw their knowledge from the great book of the world, and the poet, whether he is a knower or not, is dependent on and speaks about that world. No written book is sufficient unto itself;



every book is essentially related to something beyond itself which acts as a standard for it. Socrates has gradually narrowed the discussion and focused on the poet as a source of knowledge and on the rhapsode as a knower of that knowledge. Ion does not notice that it is the diviner, not the rhapsode, who is the expert on Homer in this case. The consequences of that fact will become clear to him later. Now the argument has established only that a man can speak well about Homer because he knows the subject matter about which Homer speaks. It thus becomes necessary to determine what Homer speaks about, since Ion must be a knower of that in order to be a competent interpreter of Homer. If Homer speaks about the same things as Hesiod, Ion's claim to be incompetent about Hesiod will not be able to stand, whether or not Homer and Hesiod agree about those things.

531c What is it, then, that Homer speaks about and the knowledge of which Ion must be presumed to possess? The answer is, simply, everything—everything human and divine. Homer speaks about the whole, and if he speaks truly, he reveals to men those things which they most want and need to know if they are to live well. At this point Socrates reveals for the first time the reason for his choosing to speak to this slight man who is never himself aware of the import of the discussion. Homer presents the authoritative view of the whole according to which Greeks guide themselves: he is the primary source of knowledge or error about the most important things. Every group of men begins with some such view of the whole by which its members orient themselves and which acts as a framework for their experience. They are educated by and in it from earliest childhood. No one starts afresh, from nothing. In particular there is always an authoritative view belonging to the community, and it constitutes the deepest unity of that community. It purports to be the true view, and the man who accepts it is supposed to possess all the knowledge he needs for living rightly and well.

Socrates, then, is testing the Greek understanding of things, particularly of the gods. At least symbolically, he shows the beginning point of philosophic questioning. Every man starts from a more or less coherent view of the whole which has been instilled in him by a tradition. Somehow that rare individual who possesses a philosophic nature becomes aware that the tradition is not founded in authentic knowledge but is only an opinion, and he is compelled to seek beyond it. The philosophic quest implies a prior awareness of the inade-



quacy of traditional opinion, and the problems of philosophy come to light as a result of the investigation of that traditional opinion which appears unproblematic to most men. Socrates treats Ion as the purveyor of the Greek tradition which stems from Homer, and therefore he tries to ascertain whether what Ion says about Homer can be understood to have the authority of knowledge. If it does not, the man who seeks for knowledge must start all over again in the interpretation of Homer, unmoved by popular opinion. Ultimately, of course, the same question must be asked of Homer himself: is his speech about gods and men based on knowledge of them? And in the event that it is not, one would have to try to return to the beginnings and start a second time. In the *Ion*, Socrates confronts authority, the authority for the most decisive opinions. He does so with great delicacy, never stating the issue directly, for he knows that the community protects its sacred beliefs fanatically. In spite of his caution he was finally put to death by the community for investigating the things in the heavens and under the earth rather than accepting Homer's account of them. In the failure of Ion to meet the test Socrates puts to him we see the reason why Socrates was forced to undertake a private study of the things in the heavens and under the earth.

As the exegete of Homer, Ion must be the knower of the things of which Homer speaks if he is to be taken seriously. He must, it has been made clear, possess the art of the whole. According to the most famous of Socratic professions, Socrates is ignorant, ignorant about the whole, and his awareness of his ignorance causes him to make a quest for knowledge. He knows what it means to possess knowledge, and in the *Ion* he shows the kinds of things that men must think they know and why they are unable to see the inadequacy of their opinions. As the spokesman of the tradition, Ion has answers to the most important questions, but he does not know that those answers are themselves questionable. Socrates' contribution is only that of questioning the traditional answers and thereby elaborating the essential structure of human alternatives.

Socrates is, therefore, deeply indebted to the tradition, which is the only basis for the ascent to a higher level of consciousness, but he is forced to break with it. In the *Apology* Socrates reports that he examined three kinds of men who were supposed to know: statesmen, poets, and artisans. He chose the statesmen and the poets because they are men whose very activity implies knowledge of the whole. Thus the commands of statesmen imply that they know what the



good life is, and the tales of poets tell of gods and men, death and life, peace and war. Socrates discovered that statesmen and poets knew nothing but that the artisans did in fact know something. They could actually do things such as making shoes or training horses, and by their ability to teach their skills to others they proved they possessed knowledge. Nevertheless Socrates preferred to remain ignorant in his own way rather than to become knowledgeable in the way of artisans, for the latter's knowledge was of partial things, and their pride of competence caused them to neglect the human situation as a whole. However, Socrates did learn from the artisans what knowledge is and hence was made aware that those who talk about the whole do not possess knowledge of it. The choice seems to be between men who talk about the whole but are both incompetent and unaware of their incompetence, and men who deal with insignificant parts of the whole competently but are as a consequence oblivious of the whole. Socrates adopts a moderate position; he is open to the whole but knows that he does not know the answers although he knows the questions. In the *Ion*, he applies the standard of knowledge drawn from the arts to the themes treated by poetry, thus showing wherein poetry and the tradition fail and what stands in the way of such knowledge.

531d- After determining what Homer talks about, Socrates asks whether  
 532c all poets do not speak about the same things. Ion recognizes that an admission that they do would imply both that he is conversant with all the poets and that Homer is comparable to other poets. While agreeing that other poets do speak about the same things as Homer, Ion, therefore, adds that they do not do so in the same way. He means that Homer cannot be judged by the same standard as other poets, that they do not, as it were, inhabit the same world. Ion does not really accept or understand the position which Socrates has been developing; he wants to interpret the world by the book rather than the book by the world. He is quickly disarmed, however, when Socrates asks whether the difference consists in the others being worse than Homer. Ion cannot resist affirming this suggestion; its corollary, that Homer is better, he reinforces with an oath by Zeus.

"Better" and "worse," Socrates is quick to respond, are terms of relation, and the things to which they apply are comparable. Turning to the standard provided by the arts, the expert—the man who knows an art—is equally competent to judge all speeches that concern the objects of his specialty. To determine that one speech is



better, a man must know that another is worse. When someone speaks about numbers, the arithmetician judges whether he speaks well or badly; when someone speaks about healthy foods, the doctor judges whether he speaks well or badly. The two are able to do so because they know numbers and health, respectively. Who is it, then, who can judge of the better and worse speeches of poets because he knows the object about which the poet speaks? The difficulty of responding to this question reveals the problem of the dialogue. The premise of the discussion with Ion is that the rhapsode is the competent judge of the poets' speeches, but rhapsodes are not even aware of the questions, let alone the answers. The very existence of the rhapsodes—these shallow replacements for knowers of the art of the whole—serves to initiate us into a new dimension of the quest for knowledge of the highest things. In investigating Ion, Socrates studies a kind of popular substitute for philosophy. When we reflect on who judges whether Ion speaks well or badly, we recognize that it is not an expert but the people at large. The issue has to do with the relation of knowledge and public opinion in civil society.

The iron-clad necessity of the argument based on the arts thus constrains Socrates and Ion to accept the conclusion that, if Ion is clever about Homer, he is also clever about Hesiod and Archilochus. Socrates urbanely maintains the unquestioned hypothesis of the dialogue, that Ion does in fact know Homer, and concludes from it that Ion is an expert on all poets. This conclusion is excellent and ineluctable except that it is not true. Ion recognizes that he is confronted by a mystery: reason forces him to be expert on all poets and he is not; he cannot give an account of himself. The tables are turned; his confidence is somewhat abated, and now he turns to Socrates, who has established some authority over him, for an explanation. With the poets other than Homer he dozes as do the people, according to Socrates' description in the *Apology*, when they have no gadfly to arouse them. It is this miracle that needs clarification.

532 Socrates has no difficulty in supplying the answer: he responds that  
c-d Ion is incapable of speaking about Homer by art and exact knowledge. Ion is not an expert as are other experts. Socrates pursues this result with further and more pointed comparisons to the other arts. At the same time, he takes advantage of his new prestige to make it quite clear to Ion that the latter is now in tutelage. He poses a question in an obscure way and forces Ion to ask for an explanation; Ion who wanted to be heard now must hear instead, and Socrates, by



engaging Ion's passions, will be a far more compelling performer for Ion than Ion would have been for him. But Ion, whose vanity is now involved, is not without his own wiles for preserving his self-esteem and humiliating Socrates. He gives gay assent to his instruction with the remark that he enjoys hearing "you wise men." For him, Socrates' argument is to be a display, such as any of the currently popular sophists might give, of technical virtuosity at confuting common sense, a display more notable for form than for substance. If one treats Socrates in this way, he need not be taken too seriously; one can observe him idly as one does any other performer. Socrates, however, does not grant Ion this protection for his vanity. He takes the offensive himself and accuses Ion of being wise along with actors and poets, whereas he, Socrates, speaks only the truth, as befits a private man. The opposition between what is here called wisdom and public men, on the one hand, and truth and private man, on the other, hints at the human situation which forces Ion to be ignorant without being aware of it and points to the precondition of the pursuit of the truth. In order to satisfy their public, the public men must pretend to wisdom, whereas only the private man, who appears to belong to a lower order of being, is free to doubt and free of the burden of public opinion. The private life seems to be essential to the philosophic state of mind. For example, the private man can think and speak of mean and contemptible things which are revealing but are beneath the exalted level expected of public men.

532d- After this skirmish for position, Socrates returns to tutoring his  
 533e new pupil. Arts are wholes, Socrates argues, and the practitioners of an art are thus comparable; the man who can judge one practitioner of an art is in possession of the means to criticize all of its practitioners. He now provides Ion with examples of arts which are much more like rhapsody than either medicine or arithmetic are; he cites imitative painting, sculpture, and flute, harp, and cither playing. (He here covertly insults Ion by appearing to compare his grand art with the relatively trivial ones of flute, harp, and cither playing.) The ostensible purpose of this segment of the discussion is to prove to Ion that the grasp of an art implies competence to deal with all of it; Socrates succeeds in doing this and thus forces Ion to realize that he cannot pretend to the authority of art, as Socrates had first led him to believe he could. However, these examples implicitly raise a further problem that remains unexamined for the moment. What is it that constitutes the unity or wholeness of the arts of painting and sculpture? Two



possible answers suggest themselves: their subject matters or their use of materials. Obviously, the things represented are primary in one sense, but the medium is a more distinguishing and clearly separable aspect. The entire thrust of Socrates' argument is toward identifying poetry with its subject matter and not with its medium. He abstracts from the poetic in poetry, from what constitutes its characteristic charm, although in a hidden way he attempts to explain that charm. The duality of style and content, or medium and subject matter, in poetry calls to mind the two aspects of Ion's art mentioned by Socrates at the beginning: the rhapsodes are adorned and they understand the thought of the poet. Socrates seems to forget the beautiful in poetry, just as he has neglected to discuss the rhapsodes' adornment. But while apparently paying attention only to the poets' teaching, he is actually studying the relationship of the true to the beautiful, or the relationship of philosophy to poetry, from the point of view of philosophy or truth. Socrates is perfectly aware of the uniqueness of poetry, and he is examining the role poetry plays in establishing the false but authoritative opinions of the community. The need for poetry is one of the most revealing facts about the human soul, and that need and its effect on the citizens constitute a particular problem for Socrates' quest. Ion's total confusion about the difference between speaking *finely* and speaking *well*, between the charming and the true, is exemplary of the issue Socrates undertakes to clarify.

The examples of practitioners of arts used by Socrates, in the context of showing Ion that he must know all the poets, help to make an amusing, covert point. There is one painter, a contemporary; there are three sculptors, only one of whom is a contemporary, while the other two are mythical personages. Five rhapsodes are named; the only contemporary is Ion himself, and the others are all mythical. Of the mythical rhapsodes at least two of the first three met violent death as a result of their singing. The fourth, Phemius, served the mob of suitors running riot in Ithaca during the king's absence. He was saved from suffering death for it only by begging for mercy at the feet of the wise Odysseus. Perhaps there is a hidden threat in Socrates' speech; at least Ion asks for Socrates' succor, finally yielding completely. What does it mean that he who knows he speaks most *finely* or *beautifully* of all men about Homer and of whom all others assert that he speaks *well*, is unable to do so about other poets?

The dialogue has three major divisions. Ion's plea to Socrates ends



the first, which has concluded that a knower of Homer must be a knower of the whole art of poetry and, implicitly, of the whole.

The central section of the *Ion* has, in turn, three parts, two long speeches on divine possession surrounding an interlude of discussion. The explicit intention of this section is to find some source of Ion's power other than art. This attempt at first succeeds but is finally rejected by Ion, and the final section of the dialogue is an effort to resuscitate his reputation as the possessor of an art. In this dramatic context Socrates' teaching about divine possession must be interpreted. It is presented as *the* alternative for giving dignity to Ion's speech about Homer; it proves unsatisfactory, but since the other alternative is no less unsatisfactory, it helps to reveal the nature of Ion's claim and appeal.

533c— Ion insists that Socrates try to explain why Ion is so good about  
535a Homer and not about the other poets. In response, Socrates provides Ion with a respectable and flattering answer—divine possession. Moreover, he takes the opportunity to do what Ion himself had for so long wished to do; he offers a poetic display and gives a long speech, beautifully adorned, telling of gods and men and their relations. And the speech has the effect on Ion that poetry is supposed to have. “Yes, by Zeus . . . the speeches somehow lay hold of my soul.” Socrates plays the poet, not to say the god. It remains to be seen whether he himself is divinely possessed or whether he self-consciously and rationally constructs a tale designed to appeal to Ion's needs and wishes.

The tale Socrates tells does satisfy Ion's demands. It explains why he can only interpret Homer and at the same time gives his interpretations a dignity perhaps greater than those based on an art would have, for there is no dignity greater than that of the gods. Socrates seemingly succeeds where Ion has failed: he establishes a special place for Homer, one that transcends the limits of rational comparison; the comparison between Homer and others would be akin to the comparison between the Bible and another book made by a believer rather than the comparison between two technical treatises. There is a source of wisdom which does not depend on the rational study of nature (a word which does not occur in the *Ion*), so that art is not the only road to wisdom. It must be stressed that art and divine possession are not merely two ways to arrive at the same result, alternative ways of understanding the same thing. They are exclusive, each implying a different and contrary view of the whole. An art requires a subject matter which is permanent and governed by intelligible rules.



Divine possession implies the existence of elusive and free gods who are not to be grasped by reason, who govern things and who can only be known if they choose to reveal themselves. In the latter case the highest and most decisive things are to be known only by the word rather than the word being judged by the thing. Ion, as the spokesman of a god, and not the artisan, would be the one who would know the truth. Socrates not only describes the well-known and undeniable phenomenon of passionate, frenzied insight but backs up the description by asserting that the source of that insight is really a god and that, hence, it is of the highest status. Reason (*noûs*) is delusive and must be denigrated.

Socrates takes *enthusiasm*, literally the presence of a god within, as the archetype of the poetic experience. The unreasoning and unreasonable movement of the soul which expresses itself in the orgiastic dances of the Corybantes is an example of the kind of condition in which this revelation is likely to be found. This is the state of soul in which men foretell the future, become diviners and oracles. Religious excitement and fanaticism constitute the ambiance in which Ion and his poetry move. Socrates compares the god to a lodestone which both moves and lends its power to move to other things. Reason, perhaps a source of rest or of self-motion, must be out of a man for him to be affected fully by this source of motion. Poetry, as presented here, ministers particularly to that part of the soul which longs for worship of the sacred, and Ion, who sings at the festivals dedicated to the gods, finds himself at home in this atmosphere of man's longing for the divine. Socrates, however, suggests that the stone can be understood in two different ways. One interpretation comes from Euripides, a poet, who calls it the Magnet, implying it is only a stone, and the other comes from the vulgar, who call it the Heracleian, implying that only the presence of the divine can account for its mysterious power. It might be suggested that in this speech Socrates adopts the account of the vulgar to explain Ion's mysterious attractiveness, lending to that attractiveness a significance commensurate with his and his audiences' wishes.

535      Upon Ion's enthusiastic reception of his speech, Socrates questions  
a-e him. He does so ostensibly to tighten the links of his argument but with the real effect of revealing finally the nature of Ion's soul, this little Ion as opposed to the great interests he represents. At the same time Socrates elaborates the character of the religious experience which has been suggested. The poet is the spokesman of a god, and



the rhapsode is the spokesman of a poet and hence the spokesman of a spokesman. As a part of this great chain, Ion is asked to tell frankly of his experiences on the stage. Is he not possessed when he tells the fearful tales of the avenging Odysseus and Achilles, or the piteous ones of the sufferings of Hecuba and Priam? When he recites, is he not out of his mind and does he not suppose his soul transported to the place of these events? Ion confesses freely to this rapture, this total sympathy with his subject. When he tells of the piteous, his eyes fill with tears, and when he tells of the fearful, his hair stands on end and his heart jumps. Ion's world is that of the passions connected with tragedy; he arouses pity and fear, and he purveys that most curious of pleasures, the pleasure experienced in the tears shed for the imaginary sufferings of others. Men desire and need the satisfaction found in contemplating the mutilation and death of noble men. This satisfaction is provided in beautiful poetry and is presided over by fair gods. Socrates points out how unreasonable Ion's noble sentiments are in the real circumstances in which he finds himself—he, adorned with golden crowns, cries when he has not lost his crowns and is frightened when his friendly audience does not attack him. Ion's tears, Socrates implies, would be only for his golden crown, and his terror only for his life and comfort. He may be the spokesman for the grandest beings and sentiments, but he is a very ordinary mortal. His tragedy would be the loss of the means of display and self-preservation. He is, in the deepest sense, an actor. Ion readily accepts Socrates' characterization of his situation, without sensing his own vulgarity in doing so.

Finally, after establishing that the poet is possessed by a god, and Ion by the poet, Socrates completes his argument by asking Ion to confirm that the spectators are possessed by Ion. Thus the spectators would constitute the last link in a chain of attractions originating in the god. Ion asserts that the spectators do indeed share his experiences. He knows this because he is always looking at them and paying the closest attention to them. He reassures Socrates that this is so by explaining that he laughs when they cry, for he will get money, and he cries when they laugh, for he will lose money. This man possessed, living with the gods and the heroes, is at the same time counting the box-office receipts. He is at war with the spectators—when they cry, he laughs, and when they laugh, he cries—but there may be a deeper kinship in that Ion's low interest in the money which preserves life is not totally alien to the fear of death which is at the



root of the spectator's interest in the tragic poems. At all events, we can see that the real magnet is the spectators and that Ion gives them what they want. He can best be understood by comparison to the Hollywood stars, who are nothing in themselves, are only fulfillments of the wishes of their fans, but who, in order to satisfy them, must appear to be independent, admirable, even "divine." The spectators must deceive themselves, absolutize their heroes, who exist only in terms of their tastes. It is a kind of self-praise; what the people love must be rooted in the best and highest; what appears to go from gods to men really goes in the other direction. Ion senses the *vox dei* in himself, but it is only the *vox populi*. He may think himself superior to the people, laugh at them, thinking he is duping them, but he is their flatterer and their creature; his self-esteem depends on their prizes; he does what he does at their bidding. The nature of the people and Ion's relation to them perhaps comes most clearly to light when we recognize that, if what the people most wanted were comedy, Ion would not have to deceive them and could be at one with them. He would laugh when they laugh. This may help to explain Socrates' earlier opposition between truth and public men and cast some light on his dictum that the city is the true tragedy.

535e- A second long speech is designed to complete the argument about  
 536d divine possession and perfect the new view of Ion's calling designed for him by Socrates. But this speech, similar to the first one in its poetic qualities, is no longer successful, and Ion, far from being possessed, rejects it. The form is the same, so we must look elsewhere to account for the failure of this speech to persuade. The simple answer is that it no longer flatters Ion as did the first. Socrates gives with the first speech an example of successful poetry and with the second an example of unsuccessful poetry, slyly suggesting thereby that the essence of popular poetry is its capacity to flatter the aspiration of its audience. This second speech tells Ion that not only are the poet and the rhapsode possessed but the audience too is possessed. Everyone is possessed; possession is not a special honor or a title to wisdom; possession explains nothing. The story of divine possession is merely a description of the entire set of activities and attractions involved in poetry. Moreover, Socrates now stresses that the various poets are equally possessed, and Homer is in no sense superior in this decisive respect. It just happens that some men are more attracted to Homer than to any other poet. Divine possession provides no basis for believing what Homer says any more than what



Orpheus or Musaeus says. And Ion's speeches about Homer suffer correspondingly. As a matter of fact, each of the various conflicting sayings of the poets has equal divine sanction. Ion is now a helpless instrument of a blind power. Finally, Socrates implies not only that the poets and their votaries are at odds but that there are different gods revealing contrary ways. There is no cosmos, only a chaos; and the truth of Ion's and Homer's speech, which was the original theme, becomes impossible to determine. Such are the consequences of the teaching about divine possession when further elaborated.

536d Ion, dimly aware of the unsatisfactory character of Socrates' explanation of his activity, refuses to admit that he is possessed and mad; he makes a last attempt to possess Socrates by making a display. Socrates, however, again puts him off, asking for an answer to yet another question. Ion is to be forced to support his claim that he possesses an art. He will, of course, fail in this attempt. The conclusion of the first section was that Ion knew all the poets; the conclusion of this one will be that he does not even know Homer. The first section shows the universality of Ion's proper concern, the third his incapacity to fulfill the requirements of that concern. Given the disproportion between the claim and the fulfilling of it, Ion will be forced back upon divine possession in order to salvage his reputation. But that divine possession will be nothing more than an idle, self-justificatory boast.

536e- Socrates begins by asking Ion about what particular thing in Ho-  
 537c mer he speaks well. Ion responds quite properly that there is nothing in Homer about which he does not speak well. But what about those things he does not know, that is, those arts of which Ion is not himself a practitioner? Without giving Ion time to respond, Socrates searches for a passage in Homer that is technical in character. Ion is caught up in the artifice and eagerly asks to recite the passage. At last he gets to perform, if only on a dull set of instructions for a chariot race. Socrates tells him what to recite and tells him when to stop. Socrates is now Ion's master and gives a demonstration of how he should be used. The passage recited belongs more to the domain of a charioteer than to that of a doctor. It deals with the details of a chariot race, but one might wonder whether such a poetic presentation could be properly interpreted by a charioteer either. Socrates relentlessly pursues the issue of expertise. Between doctor and charioteer Ion sees no choice, although he probably thinks he himself could best comment on the verses. But Socrates did not ask that; his goal is to get Ion



to admit that in this instance the charioteer is more competent than the rhapsode, but before he can compel Ion to do so, Socrates must come to a further agreement with him.

537c- This agreement concerns the relation of arts to their subject mat-  
 538a ters. There is a variety of different kinds of things in the world, and to each of these kinds is assigned an art whose business it is to know that kind. One subject matter, one art, and what we know from one art we cannot know from another. The difference in names of arts comes from this difference in subject matter; there can be only one kind of expert for each kind of thing. Therefore, if the charioteer is expert on a passage in Homer, the rhapsode, as rhapsode, cannot be. Once this rule is accepted, Ion, who does not particularly care about this passage anyway, is prepared to admit that it is of the domain of the charioteer rather than the rhapsode. But this admission leads inevitably to the consequence that there is no passage in Homer about which Ion is competent, for the world is divided up among the well-known special arts. And even though there were some segment of Homer which dealt with rhapsody, Ion would be only one of many experts called in to interpret Homer; but, if rhapsody is anything at all, it must somehow be competent to deal with all of Homer. The helpless Ion, in order to be something, must look for some specific subject matter which he alone knows, and he finally emerges in the guise of a general.

This segment of the discussion is particularly offensive to anyone who loves poetry. Its consequence is not only that Ion is deprived of a claim to his profession but also that Homer is reduced to a mere compendium of technical information drawn from the arts. Nothing could be more antipoetic. After all, a poem is a whole, one which may use material drawn from the arts but which puts them together in a unique way which cannot be derived from the arts.

Socrates knows what poetry is; the argument is intended to be defective. The very verses cited prove this. For example, the passage assigned to the fisherman could not be interpreted by a fisherman as such, for it is a simile, comparing a fisherman's line falling through the water to the plunge of a goddess; the man who can understand this passage must know the gods as well as fishing tackle. Then, too, the verses about the healing of Machaon's wounds are more appropriately judged by the statesman who knows what kind of medicine is good for the character of citizens than the doctor (cf. *Rep.* 408). Even the first example, which on the surface looks like a straightfor-



ward account of the way to handle a chariot, is not unambiguously technical. Examination of the context of the passage reveals that Nestor is actually telling his son how to use somewhat unsportsmanlike tactics in the race; the judgment of the propriety of such advice does not evidently fit too well into the charioteer's sphere of competence. The insufficiency of this argument is clear; it does not do justice to the poem or to Ion. But Socrates wishes to compel us to see precisely wherein it fails and thereby to see a real and profound problem which Ion, and, for that matter, most men, do not sufficiently grasp. They, in their lives, are caught up in it unawares. This argument merely reflects a contradiction in the most common understanding of things.

The problem would be most immediately perceived by modern men as that of specialization. If one looks around a modern university, for example, one sees a variety of independent, seemingly self-sufficient disciplines. Physics, astronomy, literature, and economics teach competences which are thought to be unquestionable. Now, where is the unity? They are parts of the university but there is no one who is expert about the knowledge present in the university as a whole. There is always a central administration, to be sure, but it does not have an intellectual discipline of its own; it merely provides the wherewithal of survival to the disciplines and accepts their intellectual authority. There are men who talk about the whole domain of knowledge and who are even applauded for doing so. But no one thinks of crediting them with knowledge of the same solidity or certitude as that of the specialists. One finds competent specialized speech or bloated, unconvincing general speech. It is this very problem that Socrates is approaching here, the problem alluded to in the *Apology* when Socrates tells of his examination of the artisans as well as of the poets and statesmen. He does not deny that Homer constitutes a unity, which is more than the result of the mere addition of parts. The question is the status of that unity. Does Homer's general view have the character of knowledge, or is it an adorned deception which satisfies men's longings and which they can dupe themselves into taking seriously by calling "divinely inspired"? Men in Socrates' time, as at present, believed that the arts are the only sources of simply persuasive knowledge. But if that is the case, then men's general views can never be knowledge.

If one examines the principle of specialization posited by Socrates somewhat more carefully, one becomes aware that it is wrong. And



Ion's acceptance of that principle is the source of the dissolution of poetry's unity. Socrates asserted that each subject matter is dealt with by one art and that no other art can speak precisely about that subject matter. But this is not so. What is forgotten is the master arts. The horseman, for example, speaks of the saddle maker's art with great competence and precision. As a matter of fact, he may speak of it with even greater authority than the saddle maker himself, for he sets the latter in motion. He alone can judge the good and bad saddles, for he is their user, but he is surely not a saddle maker. The best model of the master artisan is the architect who rules the specialized artisans who build a house. Socrates' argument forgets that each of the arts treats of a subject matter which is part of a whole which is itself the subject of a more sovereign art. None of the specialties is really independent, although it may seem to be.

This leads us back to the art of the whole, the necessity of which emerged early in the discussion. The subject matter of poetry turned out to be the whole, and if poetry is to be based on knowledge, or to be discussed knowledgeably, there must be knowledge, or an art, of the whole. But somehow men do not see this art and do not see the whole presupposed in each of its divisions. They have a view of the whole, but it seems to stem from altogether different sources than their view of the parts. The helmet maker's art seems somehow altogether different from the statesman's art, which in war directs the wearers of the helmets. The parts seem rationally intelligible, but the whole of which they are parts does not seem to be so. The discovery of the possibility of a rationally intelligible whole may be called the discovery of nature, and that discovery is the origin of philosophy. It has already been remarked that the word *nature* does not occur in the *Ion*; it comes as no surprise, then, that the word *philosophy* is also nowhere to be found. In this dialogue Socrates examines the pre-philosophic soul which knows neither of nature nor of the master art which seeks the first principles of nature. This art is the quest for that universal and unifying knowledge which is neither special nor spurious, that knowledge of which Ion could not conceive and we can no longer conceive. Ion's world knows of special arts which are highly developed and even awe-inspiring; such arts are almost coeval with man, and reflection on them leads to the notion of a permanent and comprehensible order which is the cause of the intelligibility of the parts. But that reflection is not a part of Ion's world; instead there is a



dazzling poetry telling of gods and heroes, a precursor of philosophy but its bitterest enemy. The *Ion* is a representation of the emergence of philosophy out of the world of myth.

538e- It is not only ignorance that prevents the discovery of nature; man's  
 539 most powerful passion sides with poetry and is at war with his love of wisdom. Socrates reveals this in his final examples drawn from Homer. With great emphasis he recites passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* dealing with divining, presumably to show once again the kind of thing in Homer with which a specialist should deal. However, he has already amply made his point, and the peculiar solemnity of his presentation forces one to search further for his intention. It can be found in his desire to call particular attention to the art of divining. This art has been mentioned several times in the dialogue and has been connected with rhapsody throughout, suffering the same fate as it. In the first section, divining was treated as an art; indeed, it was the first example mentioned of an art. In the central section, it was one of the examples of divine possession, and now it has again become an art. Although not obviously similar to rhapsody or poetry, divining is used by Socrates to point up their character. By reflecting on divining we can penetrate what Socrates wishes to teach us about rhapsody and poetry.

Diviners exist because men wish to know the future, because they are worried about what will happen to them as individuals. There can be such knowledge only if there is providence; if the fate of individuals is but a matter of chance, this fond wish would have to remain unfulfilled. Providence implies the existence of gods who care for men. If divining is to be considered an art, it is strange in that it must profess to know the intentions of the gods; as an art, it would, in a sense, seem to presuppose that the free, elusive gods are shackled by the bonds of intelligible necessity. Divining partakes of the rational dignity of the arts while supposing a world ruled by divine beings who are beyond the grasp of the arts. It belongs somehow both to the realm of the arts and to the realm of divine possession. Moreover, divining is a most peculiar art in that it treats of the particular while other arts speak only of the general; the unique, the special, are the only concern of divining, while the particular is taken account of by other arts only to the extent that it partakes in the general rules. And finally, although divining is a pious art, the knowledge derived from it is to be used to avoid the bad things and



gain the good ones. On the one hand, it presupposes a fixed providence; on the other hand, it ministers to man's desire to master his destiny rather than accept it.

Socrates' view of the proper use of divining has been preserved for us by Xenophon. In the context of defending Socrates' piety—he had been accused of impiety—Xenophon tells that Socrates

advised them [his companions] to do necessary things in the way they thought they would be best done. As for things the consequences of which are unclear, he sent them to inquire of diviners whether they should be done. He said that those who are going to manage households and cities in a fine way had need, in addition, of the art of divining. With respect to becoming a carpenter, a smith, a farmer, an investigator or such deeds, a calculator, a household manager, or a general, he held that such studies can be acquired by human thought. However, he said that the gods reserved the most important parts of them for themselves and of these parts nothing is clear to human beings. For it is surely not clear to the man who plants a field in a fine way who will reap it; nor is it clear to the man who builds a house in a fine way who will live in it; nor is it clear to the general whether it is beneficial to exercise command; nor is it clear to the statesman whether presiding over the city is beneficial; nor is it clear to the man who marries a beautiful girl for his delight whether she will prove a misery to him; nor is it clear to the man who makes alliances of marriage with men powerful in the city whether he will as a result be driven from the city. He said that those who suppose that nothing of such things belongs to the domain of the divine but all are within the capacity of human thought are possessed by madness. But they are also possessed by madness who inquire of diviners concerning things that the gods have given to human beings to judge on the basis of study; for example, if someone were to ask whether it is better to get a charioteer for a chariot who has knowledge or one who does not have knowledge? Or whether it is better to get a pilot of a ship who has knowledge or one who does not have knowledge? Or to ask about what can be known by counting, measuring, or weighing. Those who inquire about such things from the gods he believed do what is forbidden. He said that what the gods have given human beings to accomplish by study must be studied; what is not clear to human beings should be inquired about from the gods by means of divining; for the gods give a sign to those who happen to be in their grace. [*Memorabilia* I i 6–9]

Art can tell a man how to sow, but whether he will reap what he sows is beyond the power of art to know, for chance is decisive in



determining whether that man will live or die. But the man who sows does so only because *he* wants to reap. What he cares about most as a living, acting man is not guaranteed by art. Socrates reasonably prescribes that men should obey the rules of art where they apply, and, in what belongs to chance, consult the diviner. In other words, he urges men not to let what is out of their control affect their action. They should separate out their hopes and fears from their understanding and manfully follow the prescriptions of what true knowledge they possess. They must not let their passionate aspirations corrupt that knowledge.

But such a solution is not satisfactory to most men; they must see the world in such a way that their personal ambitions have a cosmic status. The fate of an individual man is no more significant to the knower of man than is the fate of a particular leaf to the botanist. The way of the knower is unacceptable for the life of men and cities. They must see a world governed by providence and the gods, a world in which art and science are inexplicable, a world which confuses general and particular, nature and chance. This is the world of poetry to which man clings so intensely, for it consoles and flatters him. As long as human wishes for the significance of particular existences dominate, it remains impossible to discover nature, the intelligible and permanent order, for nature cannot satisfy those wishes. Ion cannot imagine an art of the whole because, as rhapsode, he most of all serves the longing for individual immortality, and he uses his poetry to that end.

The effect of this longing for immortality on the soul is illuminated by Socrates' comparison of the enthusiastic diviners and rhapsodes with the Bacchic or Corybantic dancers (534a–b). In the *Laws* (790d–791b) the Athenian Stranger speaks of Corybantism as an illness resulting from excessive fear, which gets its relief and cure in the frantic dances. The hearts of the Corybantic dancers leap, just as does Ion's, and they dance wildly; carried away by powerful internal movements which they translate into frenzied external movements, they dedicate their dance, and themselves, to a protecting deity. The fear of death, the most profound kind of fear and the most powerful of passions, moves them until they are out of their minds, and they can be healed only in the fanatic religious practice. In the *Ion*, Socrates points to the most important source of religious fanaticism and suggests that the function of that kind of poetry which is taken most seriously is to heal this fear and console man in his awareness of his



threatened existence. This poetry irrationally soothes the madness in all of us. It is a useful remedy but a dangerous one. Fanaticism is often its result. The man who most believes the poets' stories is likely to be most intolerant of those who do not. Socrates, the philosopher who tests the stories as well as those who tell them, is a menace to the sense of security provided by them. It is precisely overcoming this concern with oneself, in all its subtle and pervasive forms, that is *the* precondition of philosophy and a rational account of one's own life. Poetry, as Ion administers it to suffering man, gives a spurious sense of knowledge while really serving and watering the passions hostile to true knowledge.

539d- Socrates, who has taken over from Ion and has himself been recit-  
 540d ing from Homer, showing his own rhapsodic gifts, now demands that Ion select the passages that belong to the rhapsode. Ion must look for some special segment which speaks about rhapsody. But oxlike, he asserts that all of Homer belongs to him. He does not seem to have followed the argument. It is not only stupidity, however, but self-interest that makes him so dense. He loses his title to respect if he is not the interpreter of the whole, and besides, he clearly recites all of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and not just individual passages. Socrates forbids him, however, to say that he is an expert on all of Homer. Their earlier agreements about the practitioners of arts who can judge parts of Homer bind Ion. Socrates chides Ion for being forgetful. It is not appropriate for a rhapsode, of all people, to be forgetful. Socrates implies that the rhapsode is really only a memory mindlessly repeating the ancestral things. Ion believes he can abide by the agreements and emerge relatively intact. As he sees it, the parts of Homer dedicated to these petty, uninteresting arts are of no real importance to the whole. Ion can be the expert on what really counts: the human things. In particular he knows what it is fitting for men and women, slave and free, ruled and ruler, to say; he knows the proprieties of civil, as opposed to technical, man.

Socrates does not allow Ion to leave it at this general statement of his competence in what men should say. Homer never presents man in general; his personages are always particular kinds of men doing particular kinds of things. There is a free man who is a ruler of a ship; he is the pilot; what he would say in a particular difficult situation is known to the practitioner of the pilot's art. The same is true of the man who is a doctor treating a sick patient. Ion must answer "no" when Socrates asks him whether he knows the proprieties of such



speech. What about the things it is fitting for a slave to say? To this Ion answers "yes." But Socrates will not even let him remain a slave or be a woman. Both must be artisans too. Then Socrates asks whether Ion would know what it is fitting for a man who is a general to say in exhorting his troops. In a last desperate attempt, Ion seizes on this alternative, his final hope of salvaging his dignity. Socrates interprets Ion's assertion that he knows what a general should say to mean Ion possesses the general's art; he who knows the speech of a general must be a general. Socrates began by talking to a rhapsode and ends by commissioning him as a general. Socrates rejects the distinction between speech and deed which Ion suggests but cannot defend.

Now, there is clearly a possibility of discussing man in general without knowing all the particular activities which he can undertake. Similarly, there is a capacity to speak about deeds, and to understand them, without performing them. Ion is caught in a sophistic argument. But Socrates does not do him an injustice, for if he were able to present a defense of the dignity of speech, if he had any justification for his own life, which is devoted to speech alone, he could extricate himself from the difficulty. He makes a living from speech but does not really respect it or understand it. Ion, apparently following Homer, admires the heroes and their deeds; they are more important than the speeches which glorify them. Speech follows on deed, and the life of action is the best kind of life. Or rather, there is no theoretical life; for only if there is a theoretical life can speech be regarded as anything more than a means. Thus Ion sings the poems not for their own sake but for the sake of money.

Only in a world in which thought could be understood to be highest, in which there are universals—which means essentially intelligible beings—can there be significant general speech. Without such universals, only particulars exist. That is why Ion is unable to stop Socrates' progressing from the man in general Ion said he knew about to slaves guarding sheep, pilots in a storm, and so on. Only if he knew of human nature could he speak of man; but we have already seen why he cannot even conceive of nature. For him, all speeches are distillations of the deeds of doers, and the poets and rhapsodes are but incompetent imitators of the competent. The splendor and authority of poetry would seem to indicate that speech can be higher than deed, but the poets and rhapsodes do not explain how that can be. In order for that explanation to be given, there would have to be a total



revolution in their view, a revolution which can only be effected by philosophy. When poetry can celebrate the speeches of Socrates, the poet—in this case Plato—has found a ground for the life devoted to speech.

540d- All of this becomes clearer in the further elaboration of Ion's gener-  
541b alship. Socrates permits Ion to masquerade in this comic garb, although he could easily have shown that this position cannot be defended either. This role for the actor is apparently too appropriate to be denied him. Ion now knows what he must do to defend himself, so he is willing to assert that there is no difference between the rhapsode's and the general's art and that all rhapsodes are generals (although he cannot bring himself to go so far as to argue that all generals are rhapsodes). There is a hidden madness in all unselfconscious human lives, and Socrates, in dissecting this soul, brings its peculiar madness to light. Ion's choice of the general's art is appropriate for many reasons. It is a particular practical art, one which is pervasive in Homer, one which is needed and admired beyond most other arts.

But more profoundly one can see that the propriety of Ion's becoming a general has something to do with the whole view of the world peculiar to Ion and his understanding of Homer. In the beginning, when Socrates listed the things the poets talk about, the first item was war, and it was the only one which stood alone, not coupled with an appropriate companion as were the others. The obvious complement to war, peace, is missing in the poets. Superficially this means that the great poems tell of warlike heroes and the struggles between and within cities. In a deeper sense it means that they tell of a world ruled by gods who also struggle and who refer back to an ultimate chaos. The only harmony is to be found in the rational cosmos, which is grasped not by the practical man but by the theoretical man.

541b- Socrates pursues this theme by asking Ion why he goes around  
542b Greece being a rhapsode instead of a general. Adopting Ion's own hidden prejudice, Socrates, who never does anything but talk, ridicules the notion that the Greeks need a man wearing a golden crown more than a general. Instead of arguing that the interpretation of poetry is a better and nobler thing than leading men in war, Ion offers an excuse for doing second best. He is a citizen of a subject city and would not be used as a general by either Athens or Sparta. Ion would apparently be willing to adapt himself to the service of either



of these warring cities. Perhaps this is also just what he does with his poetry: he adapts what is apparently universal to the needs of opposing heres and nows. His poetry provides the gods which Athenians and Spartans invoke as guarantors of their causes when they march out to slay each other. Ion's cosmopolitanism is only a sham with roots in nothing beyond the needs of the cities, giving particular and passing interests a universal significance. He is a servant who must appear to be master in order to satisfy his masters. While a philosopher is truly a citizen of the world, in that his pursuit is essentially independent of the opinions or consent of any group of men, the political man needs a country and a people to serve. Ion has no satisfactions which are not dependent on the approval of his spectators. He needs the cities as they need him. For political men the accident of where they are born is decisive in limiting their possibilities of fulfillment.

Socrates tries to act as though these limits of politics did not exist; he treats politics as though it were as cosmopolitan as any of the arts, for example, arithmetic. He abstracts from the peculiar atmosphere of chance and unreason surrounding political life, expressing astonishment at Ion's unwillingness to act like any other man of knowledge; he thereby provides a measure of the difference between the life of reason and that of cities. It is the city to which Ion belongs, and his irrationality only points to the city's. Socrates names a few obscure, not to say unknown, men, alleging that they were chosen as generals by Athens. On this rather dubious basis, he asserts that not being a citizen is no hindrance to political participation. Ion, Socrates concludes, must be insisting that it is a hindrance only in order to avoid giving that wondrous display which Socrates has been so eager to hear for so long. Ion, suggests Socrates, must be an unjust man, since he does not fulfill his promise. Or as an alternative, perhaps he is really divinely possessed. Socrates gives Ion a choice: he can be either divine or unjust. Perhaps the two are ultimately the same.

Socrates compares Ion to the slippery Proteus and thus implicitly compares himself to Menelaus, who sought for guidance about the gods from Proteus so he could save himself. But this Proteus cannot help the new Menelaus. So they part, Ion humiliated but wearing a new, divine crown, Socrates in search of more authoritative knowledge of the gods.